

## Evolution of a Concept

Of all the changes that have occurred in the field of public health in the past 100 years, of all the emergent concerns and altered perceptions that have influenced the course of public health service in this country, perhaps none has evolved as naturally or as inevitably as the concept that every citizen is entitled to adequate health care.

At the turn of this century and earlier, when *Public Health Reports* was young and its content reflected the preoccupation of the period with infectious diseases, the best that American medicine had to offer was available to only a privileged few. The growth of the public health movement, itself a product of the pace of life and technological advance in the early 1900s, generated the first real expressions of concern for citizens who were poorly served or without recourse to medical care.

One who spoke up, and in so doing touched upon practical as well as moral considerations, was Surgeon General Thomas Parran. In a 1937 speech, he said: "There are sound scientific, social and economic reasons for more aggressive attention to the public health. I think we have reached a stage in our civilization when we must accept as a major premise that

citizens should have an equal opportunity for health as an inherent right with the right for liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Dr. Parran was a man of exceptional vision, and the premise that he advanced more than four decades ago is the foundation upon which today's health programs are built. None of our citizens, we have come to understand, should be denied the care they need because of who they are or where they live or the amount of money that they are able to pay. Nor should anyone else, anywhere else. In his speech to the recent World Health Assembly, Dr. Halfdan Mahler, Director-General of the World Health Organization, enunciated this view as a health goal for the peoples of the world.

It is one thing to embrace a concept, of course, and quite another to put that concept—in this case, "an equal opportunity for health"—to work in a fair and efficient manner. There are those who point to our shortcomings in this respect as evidence of a health system that has faltered. I disagree. It seems to me that our defects—and they are many—attract our concerned attention precisely because they are displayed against a background of remarkable achievement. We have ac-

complished much, but we are acutely aware that a great deal more remains to be done.

*Public Health Reports* has chronicled and, indeed, fostered the maturation of public health practice in America. Through the years, it has devoted a level of "aggressive attention to the public health" that Dr. Parran would have applauded and of which all can be proud.

If adequate and accessible health care is not yet the reality for all of our people that we would like it to be, the time will come. It will come soon, inevitably and in no small part, because for more than a century men and women who were dedicated to making good health care a right and reality were able to share their knowledge and their hopes for the future in the pages of *Public Health Reports*.

Julius B. Richmond, MD  
Assistant Secretary for Health  
and Surgeon General, Public  
Health Service